

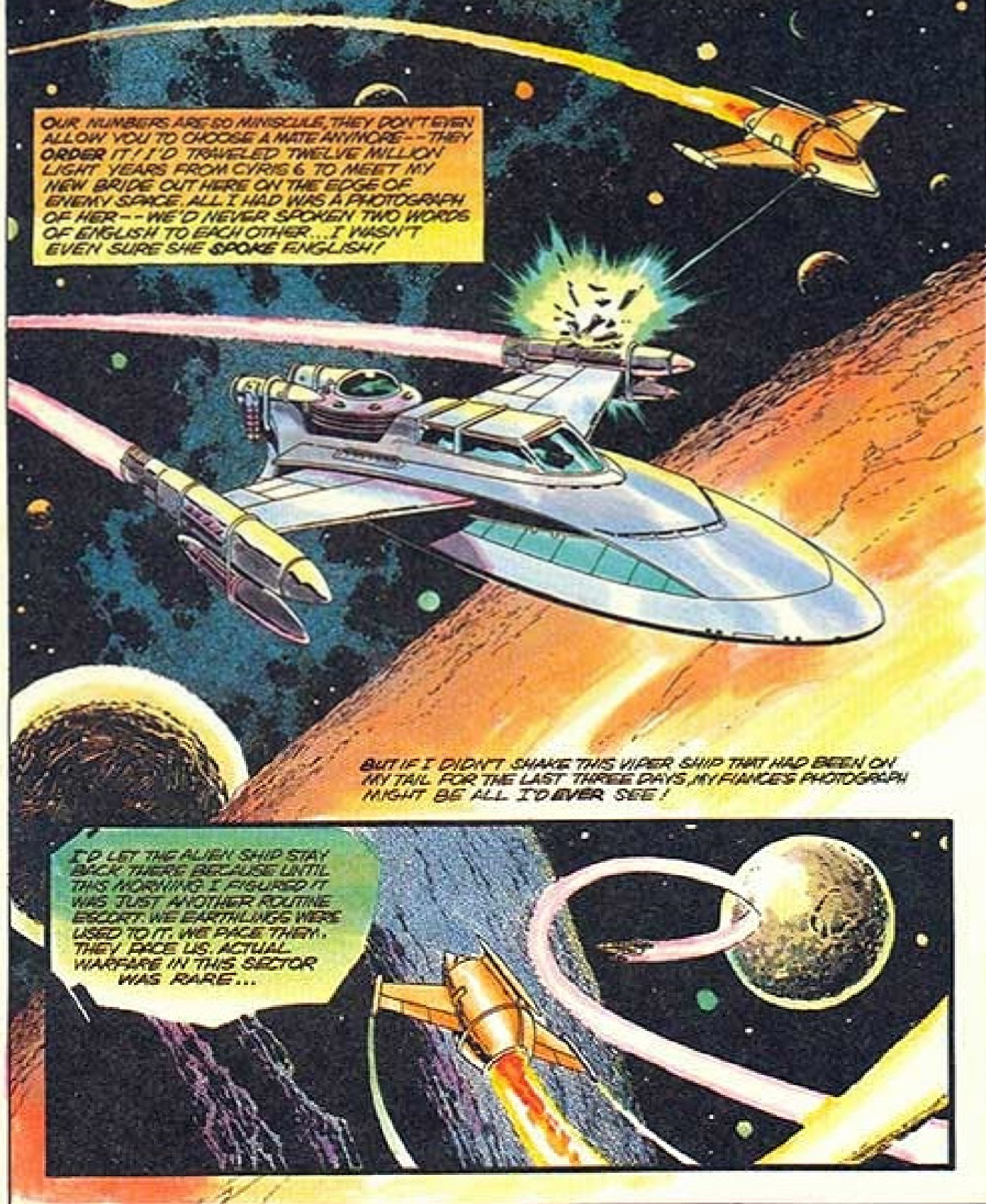
THE FEW AND THE FAR

THE NAME'S COLLINS, PETE COLLINS. THERE ARE SO FEW OF US EARTHLINGS LEFT NOW AND IT'S A DAMN SHAME, TOO. ONCE, WE DOMINATED THE UNIVERSE-- THE HIGHEST FORM OF INTELLIGENCE. NOW WE'VE WHIPPLED TO A PRECIOUS FEW, STRUGGLING FOR SURVIVAL AMID ONE INTERGALACTIC WAR AFTER ANOTHER...

OUR NUMBERS ARE SO MINISCULE, THEY DON'T EVEN ALLOW YOU TO CHOOSE A MATE ANYMORE-- THEY ORDER IT! I'D TRAVELED TWELVE MILLION LIGHT YEARS FROM CYRIS 6 TO MEET MY NEW BRIDE OUT HERE ON THE EDGE OF ENEMY SPACE. ALL I HAD WAS A PHOTOGRAPH OF HER-- WE'D NEVER SPOKEN TWO WORDS OF ENGLISH TO EACH OTHER... I WASN'T EVEN SURE SHE SPOKE ENGLISH!

BUT IF I DIDN'T SHAKE THIS VIPER SHIP THAT HAD BEEN ON MY TAIL FOR THE LAST THREE DAYS, MY FIANCEE'S PHOTOGRAPH MIGHT BE ALL I'D EVER SEE!

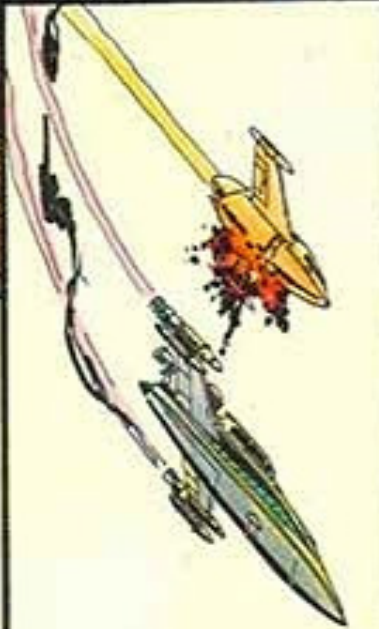
I'D LET THE ALIEN SHIP STAY BACK THERE BECAUSE UNTIL THIS MORNING I FIGURED IT WAS JUST ANOTHER ROUTINE ESCORT. WE EARTHLINGS WERE USED TO IT. WE FACE THEM. THEY FACE US. ACTUAL WARFARE IN THIS SECTOR WAS RARE...



...SOMEBODY FORGOT TO TELL THIS CHARACTER!



I WAS HIT BAD, BUT I'VE BEEN HIT WORSE. THERE WAS PLENTY OF FUEL TO GET ME TO THAT LITTLE ROCKPILE BELOW. I SWUNG ABOUT AND DARTED TOWARD IT...



...BUT NOT BEFORE I GOT OFF A PARTING SHOT!



THAT'S ONE VIPER CRAFT THAT WON'T BE STARTING ANY MORE WARS! I GOOSSED MY CRUISER DOWN AND LOOKED FOR A FLAT PLACE TO SET HER DOWN...



THEY USED TO CALL ME "THREE-POINT COLLINS" BACK IN ROCKET SCHOOL!



I DIALED A DAMAGE REPORT. NOT AS BAD AS I THOUGHT. THE SERVICE-POPS WOULD HAVE IT FIXED IN A FEW DAYS...



NOTHING TO DO BUT SIT AND WAIT. I PULLED THE PHOTO OF MY FIANCEE FROM MY SUIT AND GAZED AT THE PRETTY FACE...



THAT'S WHEN I HEARD THE NOISE OUTSIDE...

GOOD THING I'D LEFT MY SUIT ON! I GRABBED A LASER PISTOL AND JUMPED DOWN FROM THE HATCH...



MY SUIT SENSORS SHOWED THE PILOT WAS STILL BREATHING BUT NOT IN ANY CONDITION TO PUT UP A FIGHT. I APPROACHED CAUTIOUSLY...



I TWISTED OFF THE HELMET AND NEARLY DROPPED MY TEETH!



I'D SEEN A LOT OF BODIES IN THE GALAXY, BUT NEVER ONE LIKE THIS... I GOT HER OUT OF THE DAMAGED SUIT AND HEAT TO A WARM FIRE. I STOOD THERE STARING DOWN IN AWE... SHE WAS AWAKE, BUT NOT TALKING...



ONE THING YOU LEARN EARLY ON IN THIS LIFE IS NOT TO TRUST. MANY OF THE ALIENS IN THIS QUADRANT HAD PERFECTED THE HYPNO-SCREEN. HOW DID I KNOW IF WHAT I LOOKED AT WAS WHAT I SAW...!



SHE MIGHT BE PROTECTING A FALSE IMAGE TO PUT ME OFF GROUND. CERTAIN AGENCIES PAID WELL FOR A DEAD EARTHLING. HOW DID I KNOW SHE WASN'T A BOUNTY HUNTER?



NU OPA ZU ULA?

JUST SIT TIGHT AND NO ONE GETS HURT.



KALA MAKLA LE?

SORRY SISTER, NO COMPRENDO...

SHE HAD TO SLEEP SOONER OR LATER. YOU CAN'T HOLD A HYPNO-TRANCE WHEN YOU'RE ASLEEP, AND THE FIRE WAS MAKING HER WEARY...



FINALLY, IT HAPPENED...

SHE'S DOZED OFF!...



AND JUST WHAT I SUSPECTED OCCURRED...

SHE'S CHANGED INTO HER TRUE FORM!

OR WAS IT HER TRUE FORM?

MAYBE SHE'S STILL FOOLING ME! TRYING TO GET THE DROP ON ME SOMEHOW! MAYBE THIS IS JUST ANOTHER HYPNO-SCREEN PROJECTION-- MAYBE SHE'S NOT ASLEEP AT ALL!



THERE'S ONE SURE WAY TO TELL... EXCEPT THAT THE CAT PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSE TO BE ALLIES OF EARTH-LINGS... WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I KILLED AN ALLY?



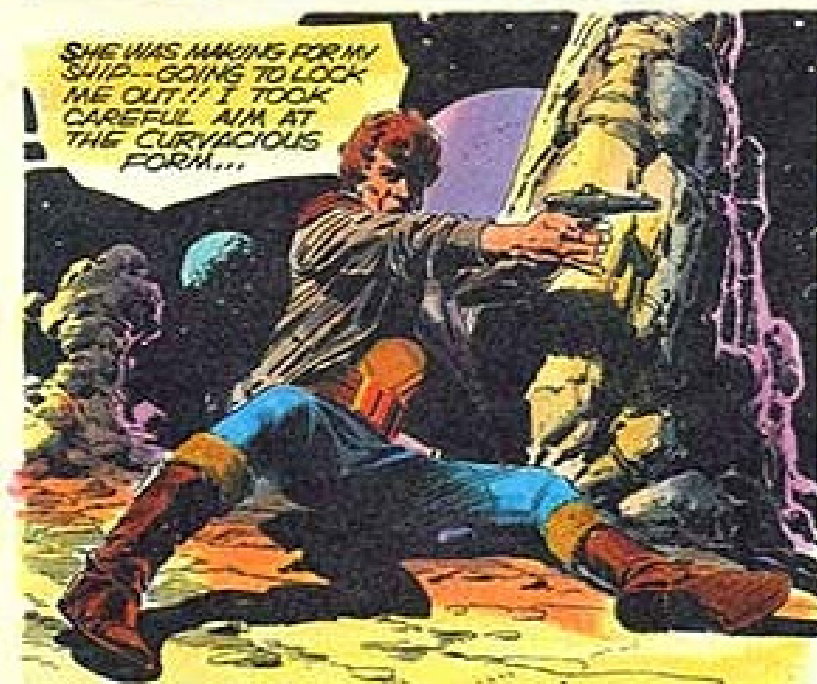
I SAT BACK DOWN TRYING TO SORT THIS THING OUT. I NEEDED HELP, ADVICE, SOMEONE FAMILIAR WITH THIS TERRITORY. I PULLED OUT THE PICTURE OF MY FIANCEE AGAIN, STARING AT IT WISTFULLY...



I WAS RIGHT! SHE WAS DECEIVING ME! IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE! SOMEWHERE IN THAT FLIMSY OUTFIT, SHE'D MANAGED TO CONCEAL A LASER PISTOL OF HER OWN!



SHE WAS MAKING FOR MY SHIP-- GOING TO LOCK ME OUT!! I TOOK CAREFUL AIM AT THE CURVACIOUS FORM...





I HIT HER DEAD CENTER. NOW WE'LL SEE... NOW WE'LL SEE WHO'S FOOLING WHO...

GOOD LORD!

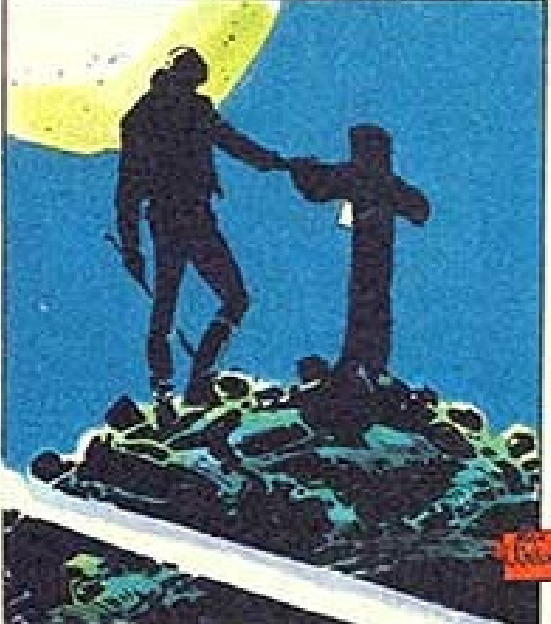


IT COULDN'T BE TRUE! IT COULDN'T BE! FRANTICALLY, I SEARCHED THROUGH HER I.D....



NOOOOO

BUT IT WAS TRUE... I BURIED HER THERE ON THE ROCKY LITTLE PLANET UNDER THE TWINKLING STARS... WONDERING WHEN THE WARS WOULD STOP... WONDERING WHEN PEOPLE WOULD TRUST EACH OTHER AGAIN...



I TACKED HER PHOTO TO THE CROSS, THEN I DROPPED MY HYPHO-SCREEN AND HOPPED BACK TO MY SHIP...

...THERE ARE SO FEW OF US LEFT... IT WILL BE A LONG WHILE BEFORE I FIND ANOTHER...

